

The English are a peculiar lot. You don't need me to tell you that.

One of our favourite phrases is 'mustn't grumble' though we do very little else. We have produced the greatest literature in the world and some of its worst music. Year in year out we give far more to animal charities than to children's ones. Our national dish, though tasty, would not enter into the category of 'food' in most other cuisines and in fact we eat far more sweet & sour chicken than we do fish and chips. Our national drink is brown sludge with something unsavoury from a cow squeezed into it and such is our addiction to tea that we became the first nation of international drugs dealers, going to war three times to force the Chinese to continue to buy the opium we planted in Afghanistan in order that we could buy their tea. That is one helluva love for a cuppa. Our patron Saint George, was an Palestinian soldier who never set foot in England. In fact, he died several hundred years before the nation even existed and as far as we know, even at the height of the mediaeval relic trade when even the tiniest church in the most isolated backwater could claim to possess of a piece of the true cross or the Holy prepuce, no other part of St George's anatomy has ever made it here. We have easily the best sense of humour in the world, though sadly nobody else gets the joke. We are a peculiar lot.

However, if there is one thing that really makes us stand out among the family of nations, it is our national anthem. It is not the most tedious one- there are many contenders there though the Taiwanese probably triumphs- they're not even allowed to play it if they win at the Olympics, though that might be down to diplomatic wrangling not aesthetic judgements. It is not the most stirring- Russia, once it reclaimed the old Soviet anthem must take that prize. Ours is not the most bizarre national anthem- hats off to our Mongolian brethren on that score, but to our brothers and sisters around the world, this nation's national anthem is the most inexplicable. Our national anthem is not about a nation at all. It is about a person. At present that person is a little old lady, which is endearingly eccentric, but probably

only if you're English to start with, otherwise, even if it's God Save the strapping young King to all but the most Anglophile it's a little, well, bizarre.

There are more absolute monarchies, there are older ones, there are more domesticated and friendly bike-riding ones but none are quite so inextricably linked with the national image as the English. Up until quite recently the teaching of history in English schools was principally about kings and queens- I can still probably list all the monarchs since the Norman conquest and tell you their relation to each other. It might get a bit hazy around George I whose relation to his predecessor was something like Great Auntie Hilda's 2nd cousin five times removed but at least he's a Protestant. England is kings and queens. You would have thought then that in the Church of England we would know what to do with the feast of Christ the King but we don't: we usually keep it, if we keep it at all, with faint embarrassment or mild bemusement.

Perhaps this might be because the monarch is, in theory, the head of the Church of England- a surprise to you perhaps that we *have* a head when we seem to insistently act like a headless chicken. Maybe because of this we are embarrassed when another king comes along. But to be honest, although the Queen is, in theory, head of the Church of England, she is also, in theory, ruler of this country: the practice tends on both scores to be very different to the theory. We're not embarrassed about Christ the King because the queen of England is our head.

But because in England we are so used to the monarchy, because our national consciousness, the history we tell ourselves, the main source of our tourist income even, comprises the good, the bad, the mad and the indifferent Elizabeths and Henrys who have landed on these shores, lorded it up and lost their heads; we know what a King looks like and we don't see one when we look at Christ.

Christ the King. What sort of King is this? A king with no kingdom, no army, no followers, no ministers: a king with a crown of thorns and a cross for a throne.

What sort of King is that?

Mocked and derided by any who pass by, stripped, beaten, spat upon, nails of iron hammered through his hands and feet.

What sort of King is that?

After a perfunctory and frankly non-forensic examination, by the authority of Caesar, Pilate puts Jesus to death: and what greater proof of kingship is there than the power of life and death over your subjects? Who is king in that equation? The man on the cross, or the man in the palace in Rome?

Where do we see a king as we watch three men fighting for each breath as they suffocate on a cross? Is it some sort of bitter cruel parody as 'King Jesus' receives supplicants as he is executed and grants the honours of his Kingdom? 'Today you will be with me in paradise'? What sort of King is this?

Is it a sick joke as Jesus divides his royal inheritance and bequeaths his mother to his beloved disciple and him to her. What sort of King is this?

Victorious, happy and glorious with a spear thrust into his side. What sort of King is that?

The answer of course, we already know. The sort of King this is, is the only true King this world has ever had. If we do not recognise this, if we cannot see the King, it is not because, like the Emperor's clothes he is not there. If we cannot see the King on the Cross it is because we do not know what a real king actually looks like. The parody of kingship, as it turns out, is not this battered Galilean in the crown of thorns but the kings of this world. It is Tiberius Caesar the most powerful man in the world; the man whose majesty is so great that he is entirely unaware when a life in

Jerusalem is taken under his authority; it is the Emperor in Rome who is no king at all.

The pomp, the circumstance, the ceremony, the royal diadems, the furs and jewels, the genealogies and dynasties, the ministers and servants and honour guards: these do not make a king.

For the crown, the orb, the sceptre, the ermine robes of state, the palace, the throne and the dominion of the true King is Love; that Love which found its crowning expression on the Cross, the Love which pleads for forgiveness for its executioner, the Love which promises paradise to the repentant thief. Of such Love is made a King.

If God is Love and it is love that makes a king, who else can Jesus be but Christ our King. And to Him...